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ABSTRACT

The origin and development of two women's colleges, Mount Holyoke of Massachusetts and Meredith College of North Carolina, are compared, illustrating some of the early chapters of American higher education, when religious purposes for schools were common, but when schools for women were not. The social, historical, and religious contexts of the founding of both schools, Mount Holyoke in 1837 and Meredith in 1899, are discussed. In addition, the personal contribution of Mary Lyon, the founder of Mount Holyoke, is emphasized, including her academic ideals, her ideas about the role of women, and her work in raising the money to start the school. The distinctive aspects of the founding of Meredith, with its origins in the Baptist Church and the chivalric ideas regarding women prevalent in the South at that time, are also emphasized. Major changes in the schools since their founding are briefly summarized. Contains 24 references. (KM)

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares and contrasts the origin and development of two women's colleges, Mount Holyoke of Massachusetts and Meredith College of North Carolina. The comparisons offer a glimpse into the early chapters of American higher education, when religious purposes for schools were common, but when schools for women were not.

The Female Seminary and the Denominational Woman's College: Antecedents North and South

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The Female Seminary and the Denominational Woman's College: Antecedents North and South

In 1980, a new milestone in the history of higher education in the United States was reached. The more than five and one-half million women who populated the nation's colleges and universities outnumbered for the first time their male counterparts by accounting for 51.8 percent of all students enrolled.[1] This predominance, however, has not always been so. For example, over a century ago, in 1870, college women represented only 0.7 percent of United States women who ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-one.[2] For the student of higher education, the story of the growth of women's colleges offers a revealing look at changing social and economic patterns in America, patterns which were distinctly American, in part because of the American woman's role in early American life.

The colonial woman in America was forced by circumstances to be more independent and industrious than her European counterpart. Perhaps it was inevitable that the demands made on her by the American experience should eventually result in her seeking an education which prepared her for those demands--even if pursuing an education did place her in an environment traditionally reserved for men. The phenomenon of women's education has been carefully described by Woody.[3] Two early stages in women's education, viz., the female seminary and the early woman's college, are reflected in two institutions: Mount Holyoke of Massachusetts and Meredith

College of North Carolina. Together these schools fairly represent the northeastern female seminary and the southern denominational woman's college. Indeed the two schools remind one of the conservative social and religious contexts of early American higher education.

However, there are some engaging contrasts. Mount Holyoke, with theologically liberal Congregational (and Yankee) affiliations, was founded in 1837 by a woman. On the other hand, Meredith College began as a Baptist female seminary a generation after the Civil War (1899), over sixty years after Thomas Meredith's vision for the school. Further contrasts appear in the schools' patterns of founding. Mary Lyon was literally responsible for every facet of Mount Holyoke's growth -- from the vision, to the raising of support, to the screening of applications for faculty and student body. Meredith College, however, rose from a more genteel tradition where men played an active role. The story behind Meredith's slow start is not sexism; rather, a less impassioned view reveals that Meredith College lacked the determined, visionary leader that Mount Holyoke enjoyed in Mary Lyon. Mount Holyoke, of South Hadley, Massachusetts, began enrolling students in 1838, coincidentally the same year a board of managers met in North Carolina to consider "'the expediency etc. of establishing a Female Seminary under the auspices of the Baptist denomination in this state.'"[4] However, Thomas Meredith, one of the Board members, did not live to see the school which adopted his name open its doors in 1899. Thus, the two colleges began, as we shall later see, for different purposes, in different periods, and in different regions. Mount Holyoke's origin

and growth coincided with that of many ante-bellum schools. Its significance is implied by Rudolph ("... the woman's college movement was an extension upward of the female - seminary idea"[5]) and confirmed by Solomon, who lists Mount Holyoke as one of the prototypes of women's higher education.[6] The North - South contrast of the two schools reinforces the important fact that differences, not similarities, underscore the comparison of these two woman's colleges.

The similarities between the two schools however, should not be ignored. Their religious ties are significant not only in terms of support and original purpose, but also in the larger sense that the private nature of the schools links them with 98 percent of all women's colleges in the United States today.[7]

Mary Lyon knew from the start what she wanted: a permanently endowed school for young women. The school would not be operated for profit, the academic work would be demanding, and the costs would be kept low by dividing the domestic work among the students. Mary Lyon was also aware of social factors working against such a project. First, her efforts conflicted with the role and place of women in conservative New England, and with the conception of what a college should offer to prepare a young woman for life. Although "the obvious career for the unmarried woman was that of teacher or nursemaid," training for teachers was largely unavailable in the ante-bellum period.[8] But Mary Lyon did not intend to train young women for a profession; rather, she wanted "to enable them to make real contributions to society in the years intervening between education and marriage."[9]

Such a pragmatic view should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Mary Lyon's background. Mary was distinctly of the working class; her ancestors were farmers, craftsmen, ministers, and deacons. Her religious affiliation was Congregational; politically she was a Whig. Her first teaching job consisted of a "twenty-week summer term at the customary wage for young women - 75 cents a week and board."[10]

The vision of Mount Holyoke originated in 1832 when, at the suggestion of a local manufacturer and banker, Mary Lyon drew up a prospectus for the "New England Female Seminary for Teachers." Where this school for 100 to 200 girls would be located was yet to be determined, but three certainties remained: it would be of high academic caliber, it would be endowed, and it would be evangelical.

In addition to the years spent contemplating the kind of school she would build, Mary Lyon devoted over three years of intensive effort in preparation for Mount Holyoke. She shared her dream with anyone who would listen -- and most did listen, with admiration. For example, between June and October of 1833, Mary journeyed from New York to Philadelphia, to the Catskills and Niagara Falls, to the "new west" between Buffalo and Detroit. On this journey, she visited museums, purchased scientific apparatus, and visited schools where she must have conferred with teachers, principals, and trustees.

During the years between 1832 and 1837 Mary was able to raise most of the financial support of the college, organize its curriculum, and select its faculty. In addition she attended to the myriad of details concerning the construction of the building.

Finally, Mary gave the same meticulous attention to the school's daily operation.

One sees a "laid back" approach in the formation of Meredith College in North Carolina. The fifty to sixty years which intervened between the vision (1838) and the reality (1899) of Meredith College must largely be explained in social and economic terms. Chivalric conceptions of female education, especially in the South, prevented serious discussion of the high order of ideals which Mary Lyon pursued. Meredith College's early efforts at growth were also impeded by the schools already in existence in the ante-bellum period. There were already several female seminaries in North Carolina counting heavily on local support. Thus the support of a female college for the whole state of North Carolina became more difficult to envision. And, predictably, there were fears that support of a female college would syphon denominational support from men's colleges--most notably Wake Forest College. Perhaps a cynical view would note that the male founders of Meredith College lacked the motivation and drive of a Mary Lyon.

National financial crises almost spelled disaster for both Mount Holyoke and Meredith College during their formative years. Only the tenacity of Mary Lyon could have survived the scare of 1837, and Meredith's late start saved it from catastrophe during the 1890's when investments declined in value.

The two schools' means of support reflected changes in time as well as certain social contrasts. From the beginning Mount Holyoke did not receive its financial support from organized religion. The operant term here is "organized," not "religion"; for while no one

denomination supported Mount Holyoke, certainly without the sacrificial giving of strongly evangelical patrons who believed in Mary Lyon and the religious mission of her school, the support Mount Holyoke did receive would not have been nearly as generous. On the other hand, Meredith's founding and support contrasted sharply with Mount Holyoke's non-denominational beginning. Although decidedly tied to the Baptist denomination from its start, Meredith also had the added inducements of local support, a phenomenon which was to "bless" nineteenth century colleges.[11] Several North Carolina cities offered acreage and cash sums as inducements to Meredith. Johnson reports that the Board's selection of Raleigh was "rigorously protested" by the city of Durham.[12] But with respect to financial support, clearly Meredith's chief contrast with Mount Holyoke was to be its strong ties to the state Baptist convention.

The curricular patterns of the two schools further emphasize their original distance in time and space. One looks with awe upon Mount Holyoke's forty-week year (including four weeks for review and examinations, the remaining thirty-six being devoted to classroom recitation). Students spent three years (their junior, middle, and senior years) in a curricular pattern which represented less than half of that available at a men's college in the 1840's. For example, there was no Greek, "limited" Latin, and "about half the mathematics required of young men."[13] Despite this elementary beginning, "Mary Lyon never relaxed her efforts to make admission more and more selective."[14] Apparently, the curriculum responded accordingly. American poetess Emily Dickinson, while enrolled as a

student at Mount Holyoke in 1847, reported in a letter that "quite a number" of students left the school after "finding the examinations more difficult than they [had] anticipated...."[15] By way of contrast, the original plans for Meredith displayed greater sophistication. Reflecting curricular patterns of the late nineteenth century, Meredith began with three departments (Literature and Science, Fine Arts, and Technical Training) in which the A.B. and A.M. degrees were offered.

Opening day for both schools provided both suspense and surprises. Mount Holyoke's selection process had turned a number of students away, and it was anybody's guess as to how many young women would actually enroll. Thus the five-story building and the eighty young women who enrolled in November 1837 were, according to Tewksbury's figures, part of a hazardous undertaking. Indeed, of 516 institutions founded before 1860, only twenty percent (104) were still in existence in the 1900's.[16] Meredith was able to accommodate the surplus of young women who enrolled during 1899 (125 were expected; 180 registered the first day; by the end of year the total had swollen to 220) because sixty-seven were residents of Raleigh. To this day, however, Mount Holyoke does not provide for off-campus boarding arrangements.

The early years in both institutions reflect high ideals and hard work. The dominant impression of Mary Lyon and Mount Holyoke is that of Mary Lyon herself, rather plain and drab of appearance, but inspired by a vision which enabled her to engage others in her mission and which drove her to teach, administer, plead for funds, and attend to literally hundreds of daily tasks eighteen to twenty

hours a day until her death in 1849. Her life is a New England vision of piety, toil, and good works. However, in reading A History of Meredith College, one sees a process instead of a person. Meredith College was the result of the further growth of the college ideal passed on by social forces to women. No one then could have anticipated what social forces would later operate to insure a continued change in the role of women per se as well as the role of the college in the process of social change.

In an apparent attempt to provide perspective on the impact of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Green notes in particular three non-academic achievements which characterized both the school and its founder, Mary Lyon. First among these was the "effectiveness of revivals," those movings of the Spirit which occurred unpredictably but almost annually. Mary Lyon was sincerely interested in the personal salvation experience of each young woman. The second achievement was either a result or a confirmation of the first: the number of young women going out to foreign missionary service. The third achievement was the "least understood and most widely opposed in the original plans for the Seminary...," the domestic work system, whereby literally every task in efficiently running a boarding school was divided equally among all the members of the school, faculty and students alike.[17] Green points out that the rigor and enforcement of the work system were typical of the time. Support from this opinion comes from a student who, in a letter describing her daily work assignments, seemed pleased at having fifteen minutes a day for herself.

In the process that characterized the evolution of Meredith College, several familiar themes emerge. Early was the change in

name from "Baptist Female University" to Meredith College. In between those two names were other options, but the most telling (and amusing) detail in this phase of development lay in the reactions to certain terms. No one in 1904 objected to dropping the word female, but there was no small noise made against changing university to college. It took the trustees over five years to see sufficient honor in the word college.

Strange, too, was the amount of religion required in Meredith's growth. Although founded by Baptists, Meredith began with no required religion classes. And while most church-affiliated colleges and universities witnessed a decline in Bible requirements, at Meredith the number of hours actually increased between 1899 to 1926, from no requirement in religion to a six-hour requirement in Old and New Testament by 1926. This apparent reversal was indeed unusual for Meredith, which had usually followed the typical pattern of reducing requirements, a tendency illustrated in 1931 when it dropped the Latin requirement and reduced the number of required hours in science or mathematics.

Following the Depression, Meredith drew upon its endowment and the sacrificial spirit of its faculty (who at least three times accepted large cuts in pay) to survive. Without discounting the significance of this ordeal, it is apparent that two other decisions had an equally important impact on the character of Meredith College. The first of these was the 1921 decision to move the school in Raleigh. In 1924, construction began on what Johnson hails as "the second most momentous decision in the history of Meredith College."[18] The 135 acres of the Tucker farm gave the school room to breathe, to begin again and to affirm its identity.

While dissatisfaction over the school's location had existed since its founding, perhaps nothing threatened its continuance more than the sentiment to merge Wake Forest and Meredith College into one large Baptist university. Proponents had advanced this concept at least three times (in 1923, 1939, and in 1944). However, moves in the direction of a merger were permanently stopped in 1944 when the Baptist Convention in Charlotte resolved that Meredith College should remain in its present location as a "standard four-year A grade college for young women..." and that "Wake Forest now has and shall continue to have full university status...."[19]

Both women's schools continue to reflect the traditions of their regions. Meredith College owes its origins to the cavalier or genteel tradition which found itself combined with evangelical Christianity. Meredith's founders were men who, while deliberate and methodical in their undertaking, nevertheless valued the good life and classical ideals - perhaps more than they valued good living and religious faith. Mount Holyoke, on the other hand, mirrored Puritan New England. The Puritan ethic, with its emphasis on theology, work, and piety, literally came to life in Mount Holyoke in the shape of revivals, the school's domestic work system, and its emphasis on missions.

Despite the chauvinism present in both societies, there were no cries of protest. Johnson reminds us that at Meredith at the turn of the century, men's salaries were "two or three times larger than the women's," yet the work went on.[20] Green also is quick to assert that Mary Lyon was not a feminist. This is not to say that Mary Lyon was unaware of male assumptions of superiority, which she

referred to in a tribute to Joseph Emerson as "all mean pretensions to knowledge, genius, and greatness...."[21] In the cases of both institutions, firmly anchored in evangelical Protestantism, there existed an unquestioning acceptance of the role of women as outlined by St. Paul when he admonished women to be submissive and not to usurp the authority of men. Solomon, in her excellent work In The Company of Educated Women, is able to place the influence of a Mary Lyon in perspective. She argues that, by entering fields previously closed to women, these pioneering women helped to redefine women's roles. Traditional views of "piety, purity, obedience and domesticity" were upheld as a caution sign to women who aspired for more non-traditional roles.[22] Nevertheless, the steps taken by Mary Lyon and other proponents of female education paved the way for the women who would later take less conventional routes.

The women's college movement of today is showing "renewed rigor." According to Robert A. Spivey, past president of Randolph-Macon Woman's College, women's colleges today "are the only places where there is really a balance of leadership, influence, and power...."[23] In the 1980's, women's colleges find themselves in a stronger position than in the previous decade.[24] This strength is the legacy of both the female seminary of the ante-bellum period and the denominational woman's college of the late nineteenth century.

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